

IN THE CLAIMS

Please cancel claims 1-19 and add the following new claims:

20. (New) A method for producing a shell coating on a mass of thermally sensitive centers, comprising the steps of:

- (a) placing the mass of thermally sensitive centers in a coating vessel;
- (b) intermixing the mass of thermally sensitive centers;
- (c) dispensing a coating solution onto the mass of thermally sensitive centers;
- (d) directly measuring the temperature of a surface of the coated thermally sensitive centers of the mass using a temperature sensor while drying the coated thermally sensitive centers;
- (e) drying the coated thermally sensitive centers by passing a current of drying gas through the coating vessel, and adjusting the temperature of the drying gas in response to the temperature measurement of step (d) to maintain the temperature of the surface of the coated thermally sensitive centers at a predetermined temperature; and
- (f) repeating steps (c) through (e) a predetermined number of times to produce a finished product,

wherein the temperature of the drying gas is a temperature that is sufficient to maintain the temperature of the surface of the coated thermally sensitive centers at a temperature below the melting point of the centers.

21. (New) The method according to claim 20, further comprising directly measuring the moisture content of the surface of the coated thermally sensitive centers of the mass using a moisture sensor and drying the coated centers until the surface moisture of the coated thermally sensitive centers is about 0% to about 30% water, by weight.
22. (New) The method according to claim 20, comprising drying the coated centers until the surface moisture of the coated thermally sensitive centers is about 0% to about 10% water, by weight.
23. (New) The method according to claim 20, wherein the thermally sensitive centers comprise a chocolate, a chocolate-containing composition, a cocoa-containing composition, a nut-flavored composition or a nut-containing composition.
24. (New) The method according to claim 20, wherein the coating solution is dispensed onto the mass of thermally sensitive centers while passing the current of drying gas through the coating vessel until the centers have attained a pre-determined weight.
25. (New) The method according to claim 20, wherein the temperature of the drying gas is adjusted to temperatures between 20°C and 60°C.
26. (New) The method according to claim 20, wherein the drying gas has a moisture content maintained to have a dew point of 0°C to -15°C.
27. (New) An improved coating apparatus for coating a mass of thermally sensitive centers, comprising a coating vessel, a coating solution dispenser, a gas inlet port and a gas outlet port; wherein each thermally

sensitive center has a surface, a surface temperature, and a surface moisture content, the improved apparatus comprising:

a temperature sensor configured to make a direct measurement of the temperature of the surface of the coated thermally sensitive centers of the mass; and

a computerized control unit that provides for frequent monitoring of the surface temperature from the temperature sensor output and correlation of that output with adjustment of a temperature of a drying gas introduced into the coating vessel through the gas inlet port to maintain the temperature of the surface of the coated thermally sensitive center at a predetermined temperature.

28. (New) The coating apparatus according to claim 27, further comprising a drying gas fan, a gas drying element, and a gas heating element.
29. (New) The apparatus according to claim 27, further comprising a moisture sensor configured to make a direct measurement of the moisture content of the surface of the coated thermally sensitive centers of the mass.
30. (New) The apparatus according to claim 28, wherein the gas drying element comprises a desiccant.
31. (New) The apparatus according to claim 30, wherein the desiccant is a lithium chloride solution or a solid desiccant.

32. (New) The apparatus according to claim 29, wherein the moisture sensor is a near infrared moisture sensor.
33. (New) The apparatus according to claim 27, wherein the temperature sensor is an infrared temperature sensor.
34. (New) The method according to claim 20, wherein
 - a. the mass of thermally sensitive centers is a mass of chocolate, chocolate-containing or peanut butter-containing thermally sensitive centers;
 - b. the coating solution is a sugar syrup or a colored sugar syrup; and
 - c. the predetermined temperature is about 20°C to about 26°C; and
 - d. the predetermined number of times to produce a finished product is 1 to 50 times.
35. (New) The method according to claim 34, further comprising measuring the moisture content of the surface of the coated thermally sensitive centers of the mass using a moisture sensor.
36. (New) The method according to claim 34, comprising drying the coated thermally sensitive centers until the surface moisture of the coated centers is about 0% to about 10% water, by weight.